

MAY 6, 1993

On the last sheep gathering, one hand was from a neighboring county. The other two day men knew him well. At every opportunity to ride together, a big saddle horn pow-wow took place. Until then, my classification of day labor followed strict geographical lines. Ranchers spoke of Mertzon having three available men, or the wool house in Ozona knowing about the four boys available over there.

However, after eavesdropping on this crew, it was obvious they'd worked all over the Shortgrass Country. Boundaries or community loyalty meant nothing to these cowboys. They'd logged time on a lot of the same outfits.

Without a bunkhouse to meet in at night, the oral requirements of the reunion had to be deducted from the working hours. I'd tell them where to ride on the drive, less up to 600 yards for a companionable visit at the beginning and equal distance once the round was completed.

After the first morning, I caught on that ancient history four or five decades old failed to interest these young gentlemen. I tried a few stories and gave up. Attrition wipes away the witnesses and limits the audiences, and frees the big coyote drive of the spring of '49 to be about six times wilder than the last roundup of the OH Triangle horses.

On the final day a late frost burned off every green sprig showing. We'd just ridden off when the man on the fence saw a black panther and the boy next to him found a fresh kill. Minutes later, a neighbor warned us on the radio his men had jumped two coyotes on the north side of the ranch. When we'd tallied the marking count, the already low crop fell 15 percent and the regular man was told to start feeding this bunch of ewes again.

At noon we left our horses in the pasture and double packed to pick up the lunches. After so much bad news, I'd have settled for a dish of lime jello or a half a piece of milk toast. The day crew, however; wolfed down their food to hurry home to see if the frost had killed their spring gardens. While I was napping in the pickup, they strolled inside the yard, studying every plant in detail.

All the cowboys I'd ever been around spun stories of riding bucking horses into herds of wild cattle and recounted narrow escapes of being charged with manslaughter for their ferocious fisticuffs in town. The waddies of yore stomped out prairie fires with boot leather, and shod unbroken mules and spoiled horses by moonlight. But if they ever debated summer turnip seeding versus transplanting yellow squash sprouts, like these hombres, the discussion happened after my bedtime.

The frost set things back to January. The lady on the place on the highway agreed to having the boys back on Wednesday afternoons for garden club meeting. The black panther turned out to be a spotted lynx cat and the coyotes the neighbor saw is another story.